The POINT Database
(A database that points)

PRELIMINARY IDEAS

Introduction

By collating, cataloging and computerizing information on tools, ideas and community collected by POINT over the last twenty odd years, a powerful database could be created that would serve not only current supporters but also new generations of individuals, libraries and businesses.

This database would not be a compilation of information on any one topic, but rather a cluster of data on a variety of subjects which could point the user in the right direction. The information in the POINT database would include standard bibliographic data, prices, phone numbers, in which POINT publication it was cited **AND** short reviews/comments.

The database could be accessed in any of three ways: 1) by calling a "976" number and asking the customer service representative to look up the information, 2) via an on-line hook-up like the WELL or 3) by purchasing updates to the CD-Rom catalog.

Type Of Access

976 Usage

As a fee-producing service to its readers and supporters, POINT could maintain a current version of the database on one machine which could be accessed by one or more Customer Service Representatives (CSRs).

As readers/supporters called in, the CSR could either take some pertinent information – name, address, account number, question(s) and mail the results as time permits **or** look up the data as the inquirer waits – perhaps even faxing them copies of reviews at an additional cost.

On-Line Usage

Subscribers to the WELL, or Usenet, could also have access to a version of the POINT database, either via a private or public conference. This could be done through a fee structure, each access being charged a certain amount, or the WELL could rent the database from POINT and offer it to all its users as a service.

This version of the database would be updated on a regular basis

CD-Rom

As the database is created, and information from all the catalogs and magazines are collated, a new/enhanced version of the *Electronic Whole Earth Catalog* could be issued. As the central database is updated purchasers of the *Electronic Whole Earth Catalog* could receive/purchase revisions on a periodic basis.

Type Of Users

Individuals

Readers of POINT publications who now call the office for information on a particular concept – when, if ever, it was reviewed, where it can be purchased, who are the experts... – could now be assured of receiving a timely answer. The image of Whole Earth being "Customer Oriented", warm, friendly, supportive... could be brought closer to reality as the caller could reach a person who would be interested/responsive to their questions.

The type of questions the office staff currently gets from their readers/supporters should be fairly indicative of future queries, but as part of a general Reader Survey, perhaps we should ask the following:

- Would readers call a 976 number for Whole Earth Information?
- What kinds of things would they expect from such a service?
  - Pertinent library/publishing information?
  - Whole Earth comments/reviews?
- What kind of information would they seek?
  - Book/article review location &/or reprints?
  - Book/tool pricing information? Availability?
  - Current addresses? Phone Numbers?
- Would they be interested in a Research service?

Businesses

Individuals who are aware of POINT publications and the information contained therein might be willing to pay for a service which would provide them easy access to an information filter.

The type of questions businesses would have, and the way in which they would use our services is something which definitely needs further investigation and some questions which must be asked of a fair sampling are:

- Would businesses call a 976 number for Whole Earth Information?
- What kinds of things would they expect from such a service?
  - Pertinent library/publishing information?
  - Whole Earth comments/reviews?
  - Immediate or prompt response?
- What kind of information would they seek?
  - Book/article review location &/or reprints?
  - Book/tool pricing information? Availability?
  - Current addresses? Phone Numbers?
  - Reviews of specific fields of interest? Industries?
- Would they be interested in a Research service? How much would they pay?

Libraries

Libraries who are aware of POINT publications and the information contained therein might be willing to support/pay for either of two services:

- A full bibliography of what books/periodicals we have in our library – including LOC, LCSH and Dewey Decimal numbers

- A more complete package which includes bibliographic information PLUS our reviews/comments

The Marin Community Library System might want us to be part of their on-line system so visitors to their branches can know that the books/publications are accessible in our library. The Chicago Library system might want more than just bibliographical information to serve their users – perhaps a more encompassing service or perhaps the current CD-Rom product.

Library professionals should be canvassed as to what kind of service(s) they would be interested in and what they would pay.

Software/Hardware Information

Software Development

Questions which must be are:

- What software is available that could be used to assemble the database?
- What would it cost?
- Would it be Flexible? Easy to access? Easy to do data entry?
- What are its data exchange capabilities, specifically with Hypercard for CD-Rom updates?

Hardware

If the database is indeed a viable project for POINT to embark on, some other questions which need to be addressed are:

- Do we need one LAN that is solely dedicated for use by the Customer Service Representative area?
- Do we need a separate LAN to be used by people inputting changes to the database on a regular basis? (See System Development Below)
- Do we need another machine to be used for updating on-line version?
- How are we going to acquire these machines?

System Development

Database Creation/Development

The creation of the POINT database will be multi-faceted but some issues that need to be addressed are:

- Is there a way to access on-line bibliographic material?
- Is some of the material we need already in existence that can be readily converted to a central database?
- Who will be primarily responsible for coordinating the database creation? How will they be funded?
- Are there sources outside POINT which could be involved which certain portions of the project - e.g. updating CD-Rom?

Database Management

If the database indeed turns out to be a viable and desirable thing for POINT to act on – and for Whole Earth Institute to support – some long-term issues will need to be addressed such as:

- Who will manage the database? Will they also manage the CSR area?
- How will this venture be funded on an on-going basis?
- Who will be responsible for editing the database changes? Who will submit these changes? Who will enter the information?
- Who will have access to the main database?
- What kinds of systems should be put into place so that customers are assured of receiving timely & complete responses?

MISCELLANEOUS

Before any firm decision is made on the POINT database is made, it is recommended that at the following steps be taken before any firm commitment, or decision, is made:

- A Readers' Survey be taken to evaluate individual needs and desires
- Board members and other supporters be canvassed to appraise the desires/needs of Business
- Library professionals be contacted about their needs/desires
- Some initial planning be done about data fields to be included
- More in-depth research be done into software
- Some initial scrutiny be done of available hardware which might meet our diverse needs.
- A preliminary chart be drawn up of the database, its management and the CSR area

In addition to these issues some thought has to be directed to the following matters:

- Fee structure? How much to charge for what services to make this profitable? How will users pay for the information?
- Are there some companies who will go into partnerships with us on this venture? Broderbund for the **Updated Electronic Whole Earth Catalog?** Marin Community Foundation and/or the San Francisco Foundation for the library-link?

CONCLUSION

A central database could consolidate information and make it easier for POINT to provide true customer service and perhaps bring in new customers, but a poorly thought-put and/or managed one could alienate users and be very costly. It could also prove to be a valuable editorial tool, giving our staff easy accessibility to all material covered in past issues.

Therefore while the idea of a Central Database is certainly appealing on first glance, there are many questions, some of which are cited above, that must be addressed to see if it is feasible. To accomplish this, we at POINT must work together and reach out to our supporters for assistance and guidance – experts that can point us in the right direction!

The POINT Database
&
Research Facility

General Concept

In offering a database and/or research facility to its customers, POINT should not claim to be an authority in any one field, but should **point** them in the right direction. The database should be built to be flexible, growing in areas where interest exists as evidence by the number of requests for information phoned in.

Data Input & Retrieval

Using a fourth generation relational database, a search tool such as that offered by ON Technology and an OCR that could log in text as fast as a scanner, POINT could indeed put together a functional and flexible database.

In building the database, some measure of attention should be given to the question of tracking data -- i.e. perhaps a facility should be built into the database to flag areas of interest that are having the heaviest usage while moving other items to more remote menus.

Flagging these areas of interest could be helpful to POINT in general, in terms of identifying its users and their interests, and indicating what fields should perhaps be researched in more depth.

On-Line Links

A person calling POINT for information expects us to point them towards information, whether it be reprints of articles we have done, names of groups who are doing restoration work in a specific part of the country, identifying clipping firms who offer special services or companies which offer on-line information.

The caller probably will not want to make more than one or two phone calls for information so if POINT could offer them "One-Stop Shopping", our chances of success would rise. One way to do this would be to offer callers a direct link with other databases.

Once the caller had identified their interest in a specific database, their call could be electronically linked to that database where they would be given a little demonstration of its scope and a number that they could call for more information. If the POINT database was in use on the WELL, this service could also be offered as a direct link to a sample database with a promotion piece at the end.

Fees & Service

Using a 900, POINT might investigate charging customers a small flat fee for the first three minutes of conversation and ten dollars after that time. With this fee structure, the customer would not feel that they are getting overcharged or having to watch a clock.

As a service, POINT could send the caller a packet of information on the subject they called for at a set rate. For instance if the caller wanted to get all the information we had on the Mojave Indians, we could send them a packet for a flat fee- whether we had twenty pieces or two pieces on this subject.

Corporate Fees

For one annual fee, POINT might offer corporations unlimited access to the database. This concept could be tried out at one or two companies first to see what the usage is and then a suitable fee be charged.

Setting Up Accounts

Rather than wrangling over COD's and billing, it would be wisest to set up accounts for people and/or companies. Using their credit card numbers or other identification, a system of accounts could be set up that would facilitate operations.